

# Madness Unmasked

by Bill Herbst

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Praising the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic would be considered sacrilege, so let me be clear right here at the beginning of this commentary: I am not happy about what's happening in America and the world. I am neither an apologist nor a cheerleader for suffering. We are living through an unfolding tragedy, one that I believe will continue for years and, I fear, worsen over time. Knowing about the suffering and death from the pandemic that have spiked into our consciousness does not make me glad.

That said, this catastrophe, like so many in the recorded history of human civilization, does contain richly paradoxical elements and not a small amount of irony. To put it simply: *It's an ill wind that blows no good*. This commentary is about one particular aspect of the admittedly perverse goodness that is emerging now.

The madness of modern civilization, and particularly that of America, is being unmasked, revealed, and highlighted by the pandemic. By madness, I mean insanity rather than rage, although rage is a definite component within our collective reaction. But I don't want to write about rage. That's too easy a target for scorn. Instead, I want to write about the craziness that has masqueraded as sanity (but is actually insane), and presented itself for far too long throughout our culture as perfectly acceptable normalcy.

The collective craziness to which I refer is not the same as individual insanity, which seems to be a feature of America rather than a bug and has always been obvious. But they are connected. Collective madness expresses itself through the actions of individuals, who are its agents. Personal insanity often includes a collective component, which has sometimes been overlooked but is now screamingly apparent.

The pandemic is achieving what no amount of political or social activism could ever manage. All the muckraking journalism, revelations of scandal or corruption, and voluntary organizations fighting quietly behind the scenes for social change couldn't pull off what the virus is doing. It's ripping off the mask and revealing the systemic insanity that lies just under the smooth, smiling, and entirely artificial surface. That underlying insanity is becoming plainly visible for a huge swath of the American population that formerly didn't see or acknowledge it,

assuming instead that it was normal, correct, and sane. It wasn't, and more people are now beginning to realize that.

Not everyone, by any means. Of course not. There remain individuals, groups, and entire demographic slices within America that are so deeply hypnotized and passionately committed to whatever particular lunacy they've drunk as poisoned Kool-Aid that they don't get it even now, or perhaps especially now. In part, they actively refuse to see, but also and too often, they are simply unable to see. To put it into the medical terms of triage, these people are too far gone to save. In a country of 330 million people, nothing in reality will ever produce total unanimity. The logic of bell curves makes that plain.

But in the center, within the big bulge in the middle of the bell curve, the pandemic and all its accompanying features — social distancing; sheltering in place at home; shutdown of businesses and sudden, dramatic spike in unemployment; multi-trillion-dollar stimulus and rescue packages (which have so far gone to the least needy among us); plus, of course, general fear, anxiety, and death — are beginning to produce something astonishing in the consciousness of tens of millions of Americans.

What's being highlighted — like applying selective dye stains to a slide to make visible certain structures within cells — is that something is terribly wrong with America. Something fundamental and longstanding. Something that began centuries ago and has been building ever since. Something that is wrecking not just our own lives, but everything we touch on this planet. Something that has no easy fix, that cannot and will not be repaired or brought back to health quickly. And it's not the virus.

The Coronavirus is merely the unwitting vehicle for this revelation. It doesn't care whether or not we awaken from our toxic dreams. Nor does Nature or the Earth. The virus is not a message sent by a vengeful God, nor a Cosmic Telegram sent by beings wiser and saner than ourselves. No, we humans created the conditions that made the arising of this particular virus if not inevitable, at least extremely probable. We are responsible for what's happening. [I can't prove any of that, by the way, but my commentaries are generally not about facts or arguments; they are simply my opinions.]

For people such as myself, and, I suspect, for most of my small cadre of readers, certain questions have been in our minds for a long time. Will we (and humanity) ever get our heads screwed on straight? Will we ever stop the madness? And what events and experiences might be powerful enough to cause that to happen with minimal destruction, death, and suffering?

Through all the collective shocks, upheavals, and cataclysms that have periodically beset civilization, humanity seems to have learned precious little that would allow us to become collectively more mature and a bit wiser as a species.

If, as various religions and less organized forms of spiritual metaphysics suggest, humanity is an experiment, a laboratory for evolving beings, like a kindergarten for young spirits eager to experience material life that might spur greater consciousness, then I fear we haven't come very far yet.

From what I've read and heard, many individuals throughout our long history have done quite well in their personal journeys toward opening their hearts and minds, toward reducing their ego-attachments and the resulting suffering that ensues (for them and for others). They've moved to greater, more encompassing love, grace, and compassion. Collectively, however, we don't seem to have moved much, if any. Looks to me like we were doing better 50,000 years ago than we are today. But maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps we had to get crazier before we could get saner.

At any rate, now we have our chance, perhaps our last chance. The current discussions about how we might best respond to the pandemic are all over the map, from the sublime to the ridiculous. And it seems likely that a certain percentage of us will go toward the dark side of human nature in our reactions, opinions, and behaviors. Hell, we're already seeing that.

But at least some of us will rise to the occasion and move toward shucking our delusions and moving toward sanity. Where that will matter most is not on the far wings of the bell curve four standard deviations out, but right in the center. I'm talking about "regular" folks — which is to say, people who accept the world into which they were born and tend to believe what they're told.

In Mel Brooks' hilarious 1971 western spoof, *Blazing Saddles*, the new black sheriff, Bart (played by Cleavon Little), is rudely insulted on the street by an older, white townswoman. His new friend, Jim, aka the Waco Kid (played by Gene Wilder), chides and consoles him by saying:

*"What did you expect? 'Welcome Sonny'? 'Make yourself at home'? 'Marry my daughter'? You've got to remember that these are just simple farmers. These are people of the land. The common clay of the new West. You know... morons."*

Wilder improvised that morons line spontaneously, but no matter. What I'm writing about here when I mention "regular" folks are the modern American 2020 version of that "common clay," although most are no longer farmers. They are the people who love America unquestioningly, are staunchly patriotic, and actually believe that this is the greatest country on earth. They go along to get along, and they don't see themselves as radicals, revolutionaries, or extremists. The repercussions of the pandemic are reaching them in a way nothing else could and sparking the possibility of dawning awareness that something is very wrong in America, something beyond just the oh-so predictable political and cultural polarities of these times. Some of those people — the middle of the bell

curve — are questioning the basic assumptions of American life. This didn't happen after Pearl Harbor or 9-11. But it's happening now. How much can be argued, as can whether or not that will make any difference in either the short or long run. The premise of this commentary is that it might.

I don't wish to leave the false impression that I am optimistic about our shared collective future. I'm not. Too many of those in power — the elites who determine policy and call most of the shots — favor not merely continuation of the existing madness but even greater, more all-consuming insanity. All the feel-good messages one sees and hears on television in ads about how Americans are united and pulling together in response to the pandemic are meaningless to these people. In their minds, they are the Chosen Ones, and the rest of us do not matter. We are mere cannon fodder, little more than slaves to serve them. Some within the ruling classes are unaware that they believe this, but many are. Aware or not, however, such people are holding most of the cards. If they can, and if we let them, they will create hell on earth for the vast majority of human beings, as well as for every other life form on planet Earth. They already own damn near everything, possessing or controlling vast resources, and they are intent on amassing more. The odds against the rest of us reining them in are very, very steep. It's all too possible that the contest may already be lost.

Can our collective insanity be eradicated? I don't think so. Nonetheless, while we're still here, still alive and breathing, we have to do everything we can to neutralize the madness. The good news (if I can call it that) about the pandemic, as well as the looming disasters that will follow, is that as the insanity of America and modern civilization in general is more obviously revealed in all its actual ugliness, our ranks will increase in number. That may not be enough to give us much hope about humanity's maturing and changing civilization for the better by living more in harmony with ourselves, each other, and the Earth, but it does at least provide some solace in the midst of this new decade of culminating human tragedy.